

# Leon Trotsky in New York City

## *Abstract*

The last three months of Leon Trotsky's emigration from tsarist Russia were spent in New York. However, apart from reference to the views he held on events in his homeland, biographers have thus far ignored other aspects of his literary activities of that time. Basing itself upon the Russian émigré journals produced in New York, this article reports the full range of Trotsky's journalism of January to March 1917. It shows, for example, how Trotsky entered the fray of American socialist politics with categories he had developed during the previous three years in Europe, and how he attempted to encourage others to keep America out of the war.

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MANY YEARS AGO the journal *New York History* published an article entitled 'Leon Trotsky in New York City'.<sup>1</sup> In it impressions of Trotsky and the latter's impressions of New York are gathered together and presented in a readable style. However, although it is pointed out that most of Trotsky's work of January–March 1917 appeared in the Russian revolutionary émigré newspaper *Novyi Mir* (*The New World*), there is no exposition of these writings. Indeed, a non-Russian reader who wished to learn exactly what Trotsky wrote about whilst in America would be hard pushed to discover anything beyond brief, general remarks. Trotsky's most prestigious biographers, Isaac Deutscher and Pierre Broué, focus almost exclusively upon that part of their subject's American journalism which deals with events in Russia.<sup>2</sup> In the light of subsequent developments, one can well understand this concern. But historians should be careful not to write their accounts through the prism of how we know events unfolded. The whole range of Trotsky's writings of his two-and-a-half-month stay in New York form an important part of his intellectual biography. This article aims to introduce them to an English reading audience for the first time.

The boat which carried Trotsky and his family out of Spain pulled into New York harbour in the early hours of 14 January 1917. The Bronsteins' arrival was not unexpected. From Cadiz Trotsky sent letters to the editors of *Novyi Mir* informing them of the outcome of his Spanish episode. On 6 December 1916 *Novyi Mir* passed on to its readers the news which it had received from one of Trotsky's most recent communications: he was to be expelled from Spain and was intending to come to

<sup>1</sup> F. C. Griffin, 'Leon Trotsky in New York City', *New York History*, xlix (1968), 394–403.

<sup>2</sup> I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 241–6; P. Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris, 1988), pp. 162–8.

New York, America's port of call for many European immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Upon safe arrival, *Novyi Mir* gave him a warm welcome, declaring that 'America has acquired a mainstay fighter of the revolutionary International'.<sup>4</sup> In his autobiography Trotsky described his occupation in the United States as that of a 'revolutionary socialist'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, twenty-four hours after setting foot on American soil he brought out his first article in *Novyi Mir*.

In 'Long live Struggle!' Trotsky outlined how the war had transformed Europe into an 'arresting company' in which tsarist methods of censorship and oppression reigned on both sides of the trenches. However, alongside this, he noted that, from the point of view of a revolutionary socialist, changes of a more optimistic character had also taken place. Most importantly, in response to the most bloody and shameful war in history, the masses were increasingly becoming discontented and more and more acquiring a critical analysis. The Europe that he had recently left was, he felt, ripe for upheaval: 'the combination of concentrated hatred with critical thoughts is terrible for today's rulers of Europe for it means revolution'.<sup>6</sup> One might have thought that a professional revolutionary would be loath to leave this situation behind. Would not landing in America mean the loss both of an opportunity to lead a revolution and of the analysis appropriate to it? But Trotsky's move to the 'sufficiently old New World' did not lead him to abandon the views which he had formed in Paris. He assured his American readership that the United States faced the same 'problems, dangers and obligations' to be found in Europe. He could thus enter the fray of American socialism fully equipped to do battle.

One of his first opportunities to enlighten an American audience of what lay in store for them was during a speech of 25 January to an international meeting of welcome, in which he expounded upon the connection between war and revolution. Trotsky delivered many talks in New York, the vast majority of which remained unpublished. We are therefore fortunate that Trotsky included the text of his 25 January lecture in *Voina i revoliutsiya* (*War and Revolution*), a collection of his war-time speeches and writing issued when he was a people's commissar in the Bolshevik government. He argued that one could now trace several consequences of the outbreak of war which, taken together, were leading to revolutionary upheavals. To begin with, societies had become more and more split into two hostile camps, 'the rich had become richer and the poor poorer'. Added to this, state coffers across Europe were now empty, thus excluding the possibility of the ruling classes making the masses acquiescent with further social reforms: 'people are becoming poorer not only materially but also in illusions'. Expanding upon this latter point, Trotsky discerned a new and, from his point of view, exciting 'mental state'. Individuals, he claimed, were no longer dominated by routine and were prepared to be daring; in other words, they had acquired the qualities of revolutionaries. Finally

<sup>3</sup> 'Trotskii vyslan' iz' ispanii, sobiraetsya v' N'yu-Iorke', *Novyi Mir*, No. 851, 6 Dec. 1916, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> 'Tov. Trotskii v' N'yu-Iorke', *Novyi Mir*, No. 885, 15 Jan. 1917, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> L. Trotskii, *Moya zhizn'* (Moscow, 1991), p. 262.

<sup>6</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Da zdavstvuet' bor'ba!', *Novyi Mir*, No. 886, 16 Jan. 1917, p. 4. Trotsky followed the practice common among émigrés in sometimes signing his articles with a pseudonym. For *Novyi Mir* the most obscure of these was Al'fa, a name he had been using for several years.

there was an international group of socialist saviours—Liebknecht in Germany, MacLean in Britain, Höglund in Sweden, Rakovsky in Romania and so on—which, faced with the hostility of bourgeois institutions and the betrayal of former comrades, had for long been in the minority but would soon be leading the discontented majority to revolution. At the outset of his speech Trotsky compared an America rich in material goods, although sold for 'outrageous prices', with an impoverished Europe, and he worried whether his native continent would survive. His concluding remarks were more optimistic:

The coming epoch will be an epoch of social revolution. I carried this conviction out of a Europe ravaged, burnt and drained. Here, in America, I welcome you under the banner of the coming social revolution!<sup>7</sup>

Trotsky wrote a lengthy account of the last two and a half years of his life in Europe which appeared over several issues, spreading over several months, of *Novyi Mir*.<sup>8</sup> Published under the subheading 'From a Diary', these articles were a mixture of autobiographical incident, biographical sketches, and social and political commentary. The first category included, for instance, a transcript of Trotsky's conversation of August 1914 with the head of the police in Vienna after which he decided to catch the first train to Zurich; being trapped in a street in Paris during a Zeppelin attack and so on. The figures who found themselves in the second category could not have been flattered by what Trotsky wrote of them. Briand, for example, was described as a 'past master in the art of wire-pulling, a trafficker in the lost souls of the French Parliament, an instigator of bribery and corruption'. The final category, social and political commentary, consisted of Trotsky's thoughts on the effects of the war and on various socialists' responses to it. He mentioned meeting a Serbian revolutionary who had been involved in the plans to assassinate Archduke Ferdinand. He recounted the young man's despair at his country's subsequent fate as a pawn in the diplomatic manoeuvres of the great powers, in this story highlighting the imperialist nature of the war. His description of Vienna after Ferdinand's death was full of hatred for the 'bourgeois press' which had 'set about the task of working up the popular feelings'. At the same time he regretted that this 'irrefutable proof of the moral degeneration of bourgeois society' had been obscured by influential socialists who had come out in support of the war. Unfortunately, Trotsky claimed, the betrayal of socialism by socialists, while a surprise for many, was not unexpected for him. During his stay in Vienna from 1907 to

<sup>7</sup> L. Trotskii, 'Pod znamenem sotsial'noi revolyutsii. (Rech' na internatsional'nom n'yu-iorskском "mitinge vstrechi" 25 Yanvarya 1917 g.)', *Voyna i Revolyutsiya* (2 vols., Moscow, 1923–4), ii, 368.

<sup>8</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Za dva s' polovinoi goda voyny v' Evrope (iz' dnevnika). I. Serbskie terroristy i frantsuzskie "osvoboditeli"—Venskiya nastroeniya v' pervye dni voyny', *Novyi Mir*, No. 895, 26 Jan. 1917, p. 4; *idem*, 'Za dva ... II. Nastroeniya v' avstriiskoi s-d—Viktor' Adler—Ot'ezde v' Tsyurikh', *Novyi Mir*, No. 903, 5 Feb. 1917, p. 2; Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Za dva ... III. "predatel'stvo nemtsev"—Plekhanov'—Greilikh', *Novyi Mir*, No. 914, 17 Feb. 1917, p. 4; *idem*, 'Za dva ... IV. Shveitsurskaya sotsialdemokratya—"Gryutli"—"Eintracht"—Frits' Platten"—Nemetskaya broshyura "Voyna i Internatsional'"—Sotsialisticheskaya pripiska k' shtatu', *Novyi Mir*, No. 928, 6 March 1917, p. 4; *idem*, 'Za dva ... V. Pereezde vo Frantsii—Parizh'—Viviani—Zhofre—Brian'—Klemanso', *Novyi Mir*, No. 943, 22 March 1917, p. 4. Trotsky gave his version of how tsarist diplomacy had had him exiled from France in *idem*, 'Tsarizm na respublikanskoi pochve. I', *Novyi Mir*, No. 908, 10 Feb. 1917, p. 4 and 'Tsarizm na respublikanskoi pochve. II', *Novyi Mir*, No. 909, 12 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

1914 he had had ample opportunity to acquaint himself with the 'purely chauvinistic nature' of *Arbeiterzeitung's* editorials on international affairs. What shock, then, the Austrian party's patriotic response to its government's war declaration? Although Trotsky said that he did not expect Plekhanov to go so far as an exponent of national militarism, he stated that in the pre-war era he already had reason to suspect Plekhanov's internationalism:

in 1913, when I was at Bucharest, Rakovsky told me that just at the time of the Russo-Japanese war, Plekhanov had assured him . . . that in his opinion the idea that socialism should . . . 'work for national defeat' . . . was an importation into the party that had been brought about by the Hebrew intellectuals.<sup>9</sup>

In Austria, Switzerland and France Trotsky witnessed the same split between the social-patriotic right, the passive centre which acted as an appendage to the right, and the minority international left. He stressed the wide gulf which separated the latter from the others, writing that 'social-patriotism debases men morally and mentally', and left the reader in no doubt as to the seriousness of the battle between social-patriotism and internationalism. The war had brought forth hopes which it could not fulfil and the resulting disillusionment of the masses could only be used to the advantage of revolution if socialists remained true to their faith.

Trotsky drew upon his diary, on this occasion written during a train journey across France, for his next contribution to *Novyi Mir*. Entitled 'In a French Carriage' this two-part article was similar in its portrayal of the realities of war to the war sketches which he had written for *Kievskaya Mysl'*.<sup>10</sup> The first instalment begins with the train entering Lyon station. Immediately the habits of the trenches were on view for all to see: a group of naked soldiers stood washing themselves on the platform. The reader was then brought into closer acquaintance with life in the trenches through the experiences of a French miner-syndicalist with whom Trotsky conversed *en route*. The miner reported that most soldiers in the trenches were of peasant origin. Industrial workers were engaged in war production, while the petty bourgeoisie became officers or joined organizations in the rear. He then described the psychological difficulties trench warfare brought peasants, used to life above ground with a full horizon in view. The miners, at least, worked below ground even in peace time, and were familiar with the dangers of explosives and poisonous gasses. However, the one aspect of the war which was new to all—

<sup>9</sup> In a subsequent note in *Novyi Mir* Trotsky said that he had received a letter in which he was asked why he had remained silent on Plekhanov's social-nationalism when he first learned of it from Rakovsky in 1913? In reply Trotsky pointed to the state of affairs in the pre-war era. In public Plekhanov either spoke the language of internationalism or said nothing at all. In such circumstances what basis would the public have had for believing Trotsky's revelations based on a personal conversation? It was Plekhanov's current post-war stance that made Trotsky's revelation possible: 'If now I considered it possible to cite these personal observations, it was only because they supplement Plekhanov's current public excesses and to a certain degree add to them a psychological key' (*idem*, 'Na zaprosy chitatelei. O Plekhanove', *Novyi Mir*, No. 926, 3 March 1917, p. 4). For an account of Trotsky's views on Russian social-patriotism from 1914 to 1916 see I. D. Thatcher, 'Russian social-patriotism in Trotsky's Paris writings during the First World War', *Revolutionary Russia*, vi (1993), 229–76.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of Trotsky's writings for this Kievian newspaper during World War I see I. D. Thatcher, 'Trotsky and *Kievskaya Mysl'*', *Irish Slavonic Studies*, xiv (1993), 87–102.

whether minors, peasants, soldiers, officers, French or Germans—was the scope and character of battle:

The most awful thing is the uninterrupted firing of hundreds of different guns. Each sound is terrible after its own fashion and all, devoid of tempo and rhythm, come together in an indescribable and unbearable crashing ... from which one cannot escape ... you are led to a state verging on madness.<sup>11</sup>

In the second and final section of 'In a French Carriage' Trotsky focused upon the positive psychological consequences of trench warfare. On the train he noticed the movement of thousands of people of all nationalities. He contrasted this to the pre-war era in which, on the one hand, the industrial workers had come to occupy the most important strategic position in the economies of the advanced nations; and, on the other, old social classes, peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, characterized by a limited outlook and suspicion of all that was new, had retained a leading influence in social and political matters. Since August 1914, however, peasants who had not been in a town for decades had visited several in the course of several months. Trotsky expressed his conviction that this upheaval could not but create a psychological transformation. Specifically, he claimed that the war was destroying 'traditional fetishisms'.<sup>12</sup> The post-war world would be inhabited by a new human type, full of criticism and daring, ready to introduce rationalism in production, politics and economics. This, of course, meant socialism.

The articles which Trotsky produced from his diary for *Novyi Mir* could not have brought much comfort either to a government considering declaring war or to those who would have to go forth and fight. However, at the time of the appearance of Trotsky's 'war notes' it was becoming increasingly likely that America would enter the then world conflict. At the end of January 1917 the German government announced it was going to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare from February 1. It took this decision in the hope that Britain would be starved into submission. At the same time, however, it meant breaking the terms of American neutrality.<sup>13</sup> Interventionists immediately called upon President Wilson to declare war on Germany. In the hope that the Kaiser could be persuaded to change his mind, Wilson at first opted for severing diplomatic relations with Germany, which he announced on 3 February. Several days following this announcement the first of a series of articles in which Trotsky examined the growing tensions in America through the prism of his European experiences appeared in *Novyi Mir*.

In 'A Repetition of things past', for example, Trotsky claimed that America, a country without its own traditions and ideology, had many times provided a home

<sup>11</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Vo frantsuzkom vagone. (Razgovory i razmyshleniya). I', *Novyi Mir*, No. 900, 1 Feb. 1917, p. 3. Two days later Trotsky presented another depressing account of trench warfare when he reproduced the letter of a Russian volunteer serving in the French army. See Al'fa, 'Dokumenty voiny', *Novyi Mir*, No. 902, 3 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Vo frantsuzkom vagone. (Razgovory i razmyshleniya). II', *Novyi Mir*, No. 901, 2 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of America's neutrality in the war and the events which led it to enter the First World War see, e.g., J. Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1900-17* (New York, 1980), pp. 199-228.

for ideas which had exhausted themselves in Europe. Previously this had involved political and religious ideas; now it was the legend of a 'war of liberation'. He advised Americans to read the European newspapers of late July and early August 1914. From these sources they would gain an understanding of the aims of the patriotic campaign that the American press was currently waging. Namely, the press barons had to convince the people that its government was concerned about 'freedom' and 'justice' and that it was reacting to the aggressive acts of others. At first this 'preparatory work for war' would hold out the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the crisis, publicizing the good intentions of the home government in humble terms. Only when the plans for mobilization were complete would 'the devilish chauvinistic music' be played to its fullest extent. It was by proceeding in this way that Trotsky claimed the government and the press hoped awkward questions concerning the real reasons for American intervention would be avoided:

And how about the war deliveries which the German submarines threaten? And what of the billions of profit falling with a Europe bleeding to death? ... Who is able to speak of this at a time of great national enthusiasm! If the New York stock market is prepared for great sacrifices (the people will bear them) then, it goes without saying, that this is not in the name of contemptible money, but in the cause of a great truth ... how to call it?—morals. It is not the fault of the stock market if, in serving eternal justice, it receives 100% and more in profit!<sup>14</sup>

The response he demanded from American socialists and advanced workers was to raise the 'mighty melody of the International'.

One of the main messages which Trotsky had propagated in Europe was that the tune of the International had not only to be 'mighty' but also 'pure'. In other words, socialists had to hold an internationalist position and have no truck with social-patriotism. Trotsky repeated this message to American colleagues through the pages of *Novyi Mir*. In 'In the school of war',<sup>15</sup> for instance, he recounted how the honour of socialism had been saved in Europe by, among others, Liebknecht, MacLean and Rakovsky. He held up the Italian party as an example of how influence over the masses could be retained and strengthened if socialists occupied an anti-war position. The question facing American socialists was: would they accept the lessons to be learnt from Europe? In a subsequent article Trotsky stated that the authority of the Second International could not be cited as a justification for socialists advocating the cause of national self-defence. At pre-war meetings, Kautsky, described as the 'leading theoretician' of the Second International, rejected national self-defence along with the notions of 'defensive' and 'aggressive' wars in disputes with Bebel. Trotsky admitted that, if one studied the formal resolutions of the Second International, one would come across contradictory statements. However, the Basel Congress of 1912, called specifically to discuss a proper socialist response to war, was unequivocal: 'preserve between yourselves inseverable ties during war, fight together for its hasty conclusion and use the growing war crisis

<sup>14</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Povtorenie ploidennago', *Novyi Mir*, No. 905, 7 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, 'V' shkole voyny', *Novyi Mir*, No. 904, 6 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

and dissatisfaction of the mass speedily to overthrow the capitalist order'.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in 'Two Warring Camps', Trotsky highlighted the pitfalls of Longuetist tactics, i.e., to be 'simultaneously for the capitalist homeland and for the proletariat',<sup>17</sup> to show that social-patriotism and revolutionary internationalism were two mutually exclusive principles.<sup>18</sup>

Trotsky did not limit himself to pointing out the lessons which recent events in the European socialist movement held for American socialists. In New York he actively engaged in polemics with local organizations for the application of a revolutionary socialist perspective. In a commentary upon a recent anti-war meeting held in the Carnegie Hall, for example, he criticized the socialist party for organizing this with a pacifist group 'The Friends of Peace'. From an 'organizational-political' point of view, he argued, it was not expedient to share a platform with pacifists. After all, pacifists were well known as people who would publicize their opposition to war until it was declared, after which they would announce their 'patriotism' and encourage the masses to conduct the war to a successful conclusion in the name of 'peace and justice'. By standing alongside pacifists, if only temporarily, Trotsky stated that the masses would be brought into confusion at a time when 'clear class consciousness' was urgently necessary. Moreover, he claimed the mood of the Carnegie Hall gathering, overwhelmingly revolutionary socialist, had been weakened 'both psychologically and politically' as two resolutions, one pacifist and one socialist, were unanimously accepted by the same show of hands; anyone reconstructing the meeting's atmosphere from the resolutions would be led astray. Some good had, however, come out of the meeting. Trotsky welcomed the socialist resolution's insistence that American intervention in the war would 'only serve the egoistic interests of the capitalists of this country . . . to feed upon the unfortunate war in Europe', and that the proletariat should 'apply all the means at its disposal against the attempt to involve America in the war'.<sup>19</sup> The duty of socialist party leaders to vote against war credits and to call for revolutionary action against the war campaign had now been made clear. For Trotsky, one had to ensure that they carried out this 'great obligation'.

It was, however, events at the bottom of the socialist party's structure which brought forth Trotsky's next rebuke to social-patriotism in the American socialist movement. In a short note in *Novyi Mir* he recounted how, while attending a socialist party branch meeting, Anna Ingerman cited Klara Zetkin, the German left

<sup>16</sup> Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Chto govoriť International o zashchite otechestva?', *Novyi Mir*, No. 922, 27 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, 'Dva voyuyushchikh lagerya', *Novyi Mir*, No. 930, 8 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Trotsky also made this point in the article 'One has to Choose the Path'. Here, however, he illustrated how social-patriotism leads to a rejection of revolutionary socialism not so much through the example of recent European experience, as through a comparison of social-patriotism with other movements (Christianity, the Reformation, liberalism and democracy) which had begun as a protest on behalf of the oppressed and ended as tools of the oppressors. See *idem*, 'Nuzhno vybirat' put', *Novyi Mir*, No. 919, 23 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in 'Bol'shoe obyazatel'stvo. (Po povodu rezolyutsii mitinga v' Karnegi Goll)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 906, 8 Feb. 1917, p. 3. For Trotsky's response to the pacifist Hillquit's charge that Trotsky had no right to advise others to pursue revolutionary tactics since Trotsky himself had not been prepared to stay in Russia to do likewise see, 'Revolutsionnyi tsenz Khilkvita. (Pis'mo v redaktsiyu "N.-Y. Volkszeitung")', Trotskii, *Voyna i Revolyutsiya*, ii. 381-3.

revolutionary, in support of the view that socialists could join government-led military organizations.<sup>20</sup> Trotsky stated that Ingerman had every right to draw upon Scheidemann, Plekhanov and Vandervelde to achieve her aims but it would be better if she left Zetkin, currently serving a term of imprisonment for anti-war activities, in peace. Ingerman then sent a letter protesting against Trotsky's report which, along with his reply, was published in *Novyi Mir* of 16 February.

Ingerman disputed Trotsky's version of events, declaring that 'in aspiring to show his knightly feelings for Klara Zetkin, Comrade Trotsky completely forgot what actually occurred at the meeting'. In actual fact, she claimed, *nobody* had opposed the proposition that it was inadmissible for socialists to sign up voluntarily for the army and navy. What was discussed was the issue of whether comrade doctors and medical sisters who served in the Red Cross should be excluded from the party. It was in this context that she had repeated Zetkin's words to her that, 'my husband and my son, doctors, will certainly join a medical organization: this is our duty', not with the intention of throwing Zetkin's internationalism into doubt, but to show that one could participate in the Red Cross and hold party membership. To Trotsky's claim that Zetkin is 'one of us' Ingerman retorted: 'It is possible to be not with you, Comrade Trotsky, and all the same remain a true internationalist.'<sup>21</sup>

Trotsky countered Ingerman's letter with the claim that she had missed the central issue of the status of the Red Cross, which she obviously accepted as a neutral body. However, he advised that if one turned to the source from which Zetkin's view of this organization could be revealed, the journal of the German left, *Internationale*, a different picture would emerge. This publication clearly stated that socialists should afford assistance to wounded soldiers through their own and not state organizations, of which the Red Cross was one of many.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even if one accepted Ingerman's story, she still had no right to cite Zetkin. In his conclusion Trotsky responded to Ingerman's accusation that he was claiming internationalism for himself. He stated that before this issue could be resolved Ingerman would have to declare her internationalist principles. As matters stood she was an 'intermediary element' which had 'cited a personal conversation with Zetkin in defence of a tendency to which Zetkin herself is irreconcilably hostile'.<sup>23</sup>

If Trotsky viewed the Red Cross as part of the imperialist war machine one can

<sup>20</sup> Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Klaru Tsetkin' lushche im' ostavit' v pokoe. (Pis'mo v' redaktsiyu)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 910, 13 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Ingerman, 'Iz'za chego shum' tov. Trotskii?', *Novyi Mir*, No. 913, 16 Feb. 1917, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> In *Novyi Mir* of 3 March 1917 Trotsky replied to a letter that he had received from Mary Ragoz. Ragoz asked Trotsky what assistance could international socialists afford the war wounded when, as far as she knew, there were only two doctors among the group of Russian socialists in America, and none among the Finnish section. In light of this she wondered whether it would not be better to view the Red Cross as a neutral organization, like a library or a tram. Trotsky stated that he was not proposing that internationalists should *replace* the Red Cross with their own body. He knew that the movement did not have the resources to achieve this, and even if it did the state would not permit this 'just as it does not give soldiers a free choice between state and private doctors'. As matters stood the Red Cross had as its aim healing the sick so as to ensure their speedy return to the front and this was why socialists could not participate in it. On the issue of what socialists could do to aid the wounded, they could publicize soldiers' rights, maintain ties with comrade soldiers sending them books and tobacco; in this way preserving their *socialist* spirit (see Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Na zaprosy chitatelei. O Krasnom' Kreste', *Novyi Mir*, No. 926, 3 March 1917, p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> L. Trotskii, 'A vse-taki Klaru Tsetkin' naprasno trevozhitel!', *Novyi Mir*, No. 913, 16 Feb. 1917, p. 3.



well imagine the disgust he must have felt for the Council of National Defence and its Advisory Commission. These bodies had been created by Congress in August 1916 to co-ordinate industries and resources for national security and to prepare for their application in the event of war. The Advisory Commission had a series of sub-committees, one of which, the Labour Committee headed by Samuel Gompers, had responsibility for, among other things, drawing up plans to enrol skilled labour in industrial reserves and to suggest adjustments to employment problems to guarantee uninterrupted war work.<sup>24</sup> Trotsky analysed Gompers and his Committee in 'A Sheep's Constitution'. He condemned Gompers as a social-patriot who was attempting to put a whole generation of the proletariat at the service of militarism. Of course, he pointed out, Gompers claimed that the interests of the workers would be protected by the Council of National Defence—capital would bear the burdens of war and so on. But, asked Trotsky, what guarantee could Gompers offer that these promises would be honoured? Trotsky himself foresaw a very different scenario:

with the first practical collision with the unions the ruling classes of this country will say the same thing to them as the British, German and French ruling classes said in similar circumstances: 'the defence of the homeland, on your own admission, is the first duty of the proletariat; in this case, in fulfilling this duty you do not have the right to make demands.'

Gompersism, defined by Trotsky as the 'desire to achieve for the proletariat a "beneficial" industrial constitution on the basis of the immunity of capitalist exploitation', was labelled the deadly enemy of the proletariat against which each internationalist should struggle with all his might. Fortunately, according to Trotsky, conditions had never been better for winning the workers over from Gompersism, for during war the bourgeoisie would not be able to afford the reforms with which they pacified the workers at times of peace. He predicted that the gap between expectations of a better life and the poverty which war would bring would create minds receptive to revolutionary propaganda. Socialists could use this to their advantage only if they repeated the following messages: 'No concessions to the state, to militarism and to patriotism. No deals with Gompersism'.<sup>25</sup>

As part of the struggle for revolutionary internationalism Trotsky himself engaged in polemics with the newspapers *Forverts*, *Russkii Golos* (*The Russian Voice*), and *Russkoe Slovo* (*The Russian Word*).

*Forverts* was a powerful Jewish daily with a circulation of 150,000 by 1917. It was edited by Abraham Cahan and had its own ten-storey building overlooking the heart of New York's Jewish quarter.<sup>26</sup> The paper gave Trotsky an enthusiastic welcome when he arrived in New York and he contributed four articles to it over the course of January and February. The publication of a fifth piece, ironically enough as it turned out on social-patriotism, was prevented when Trotsky broke

<sup>24</sup> For an exposition of the origins of the Council for National Defence, its Advisory Council and Gompers's role in them see B. Mandel, *Samuel Gompers* (Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1963), pp. 364ff.

<sup>25</sup> 'Baran'ya konstitutsiya. (Konferentsiya Gompersa i Ko)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 936, 15 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> For an account of the American Jewish workers movement and *Forvert's* place in it see, for e.g., A. A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community* (New York, 1970); I. Howe, *The Immigrant Jews of New York* (1976); N. Levin, *Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917* (1978).

with the newspaper at the beginning of March. Joseph Nedava, basing his account upon a conversation with David Shub in New York in July 1969, gives the following version of the dispute:

The incident was brought about by the State Department's exposure, on March 1, 1917, of a German plot to embroil Mexico in the war against the United States, promising to Mexico the return of New Mexico and parts of California as a prize. The disclosure aroused the wrath of even the pro-German *Forward* [*Forverts*], which then printed on the front page an announcement that 'if Germany can really commit such an idiotic move of diplomacy, then every citizen of America will fight to the last drop of his blood to protect the great American republic.' A few hours after the publication of this statement, Trotsky stormed into Cahan's office on East Broadway, and an angry exchange of words passed between them. Trotsky then severed his connection with *Forward*.<sup>27</sup>

If Trotsky did go to Cahan's office, he left behind his article, for when he opened his campaign against *Forverts* from the pages of *Novyi Mir* on 6 March, he demanded the return of his manuscript.<sup>28</sup> He immediately sought to qualify his earlier co-operation with *Forverts*, announcing that he always knew that this publication was not fully internationalist. He had, he claimed, contributed articles to it as this was appropriate to the 'discussion nature' of January and February, when the battle lines had still not completely formed, and, in any case, colleagues who knew the paper better than he and who translated sections of it for him had advised him to do so. However, the increasing displays of hostility between Germany and the United States, together with *Forverts*'s statement that Americans should fight to the last drop of blood, had changed the situation. Trotsky thought that the proletariat should struggle against the imperialist homeland and he therefore stood on the other side of the barricade to *Forverts*. To avoid the possible confusion that he shared an analysis with the Jewish daily he requested that publication of his piece be stopped and the manuscript returned.<sup>29</sup>

In a subsequent note in *Novyi Mir* Trotsky reported that he had received numerous letters from Jewish workers approving his stand against *Forverts*. He pointed to these letters, and the anti-'national defence' resolutions of a local party branch

<sup>27</sup> J. Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1971), p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Obshchei pochvy s' "Forvertsom" U Nas' Net', *Novyi Mir*, No. 928, 6 March 1917, p. 4. On the following day Trotsky likened *Forverts*'s change from a pro- to an anti-German stance to the dilemma of a German bourgeois proprietor who until 3 February had published pro-German articles, but after this date found it expedient to argue for the American cause. See Al'fa, 'Kto otgadaet?', *Novyi Mir*, No. 929, 7 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> On 9 March Trotsky reported that *Forverts* was claiming that somebody had mistranslated its editorial of 1 March for Trotsky. Trotsky's response is illustrated by the heading of his reply to *Forverts*: 'It's Untrue!'. See L.N.T., 'Nepravo!', *Novyi Mir*, No. 931, 9 March 1917, p. 3. Given Trotsky's Jewish origins it may at first sight appear strange that he needed somebody to translate from Yiddish into Russian for him. However, from his autobiography we discover that Trotsky did not learn to speak Yiddish at home (his father spoke a mixture of Ukrainian/Russian) and he must have gained only the slightest knowledge of Hebrew from his brief period of study of the Bible in Hebrew (see Trotskii, *Moya zhizn'*, pp. 38, 54, 56). For an alternative view, i.e., that Trotsky knew Yiddish well and could easily communicate in it, see Nedava, pp. 35-7. Here Nedava claims that Trotsky hid his knowledge of Yiddish when he came to write his autobiography since he wanted to stress that he was a citizen of the world: 'As he never considered himself a son of the Pale of Settlement, but rather a true citizen of the world, he naturally could not admit to ever having shown interest in learning the language of the Pale.'

meeting, as evidence that *Forverts* had lost touch with its readers' views. Encamped within its ten-storey headquarters, the Jewish newspaper, he alleged, was guilty of establishing a dictatorship over its readership, of not reporting the latest party decisions which were obviously uncomfortable for it, and of social-patriotic betrayal. For Trotsky the time had come for a 'cleansing of the ranks'.<sup>30</sup> He urged Jewish workers to recapture their newspaper and expel Cahan from the party, assuring them that in these tasks they could rely on the full support of *Novyi Mir*.<sup>31</sup>

During his conflict with the Jewish daily Trotsky several times mentioned his reliance upon friends to translate from Yiddish into Russian. He had no such difficulties in the campaign he waged against the 'non-party' newspapers produced for New York's Russian colony, *Russkii Golos* and *Russkoe Slovo*. His first commentary upon these publications highlighted their differing points of view on the likelihood of American intervention in the war. Ivan Okuntsov, writing in *Russkii Golos*, thought that opposition from Wall Street would keep America neutral, whereas Dymov, a correspondent of *Russkoe Slovo*, thought that pressure from the same source, which had made super-profits from the 'blood of the people', would lead America into battle. Trotsky said that, however comforting Okuntsov's view was, he had to agree with Dymov. This left him with only one 'reader's difficulty'. An editorial of the selfsame issue of *Russkoe Slovo* in which Dymov's article appeared viewed America's entry into the war not as a desire to make more money, but as a 'guarantee of progress'. 'Why', concluded Trotsky, 'had the editorial and the correspondent agreed to lead their public into confusion?'<sup>32</sup>

When Trotsky next took up his pen to write of 'non-party' protagonists it was not to accuse them of bewildering their readership, but of 'indecentcy'. The cause of Trotsky's charge was the appearance of adverts, placed in *Russkii Golos* and *Russkoe Slovo* by the New York Council of National Defence, urging citizens to add their name to a petition to be sent to President Wilson recommending intervention. Previously, he noted, neither of these newspapers had joined in the efforts to whip the population into a patriotic fury; they knew that the Russian colony did not want war. What had made the newspapers change their track, Trotsky claimed, was money: 'In such critical moments one gets to know the real value of people, ideas, parties and publications . . . when gold was added to the ideological preparation of the people *Russkoe Slovo* and *Russkii Golos* found their place.'<sup>33</sup>

When America eventually officially entered World War I on 6 April 1917 Trotsky had already left America. Before his departure he had, however, written

<sup>30</sup> 'Neobkhodimo ochishchenie riadov; rol' "Forvertsa" v' evreiskom' rabochem dvizhenii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 935, 14 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Trotsky commented on Cahan's activities one more time in *Novyi Mir* when, to mark Cahan's speech at a meeting in Madison Square Garden, he argued that the editor of *Forverts* had no revolutionary credentials. He labelled Cahan's comment in *Forverts* that Russia was not ripe for a republic and his telegram of welcome to Milyukov as an 'impudent call to the Russian proletariat and an insult to the Russian revolution'. See 'G-n Kagan', kak 'istolkovatel' russkoi revolyutsii pered' rabochimi N'yu Iorka', *Novyi Mir*, No. 941, 20 March 1917, p. 4. When Trotsky came to write of his time in New York in his autobiography he did not mention his initial co-operation with *Forverts*, giving only a negative characterization of the Jewish daily newspaper (Trotskii, *Moya zhizn'*, p. 268).

<sup>32</sup> Al'fa, 'Zatrudneniya chitatelya', *Novyi Mir*, No. 931, 9 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Al'fa, 'Obrabotka i pozolota', *Novyi Mir*, No. 937, 16 March 1917, p. 4.

critical analyses both of the reasons for America's intervention and of its likely consequences. In his address of war to the American people President Wilson declared, 'The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. The world must be made safe for democracy.'<sup>34</sup> Seizing upon these words Trotsky, in an article in *Novyi Mir*, stated that if one took them at face value America should have long ago declared war on Britain for its blockade of Austria-Germany. What prevented this step from being taken, according to Trotsky, was that it would have resulted in the loss of the Entente orders for war supplies from which American industry was making super-profits. In turn, Wilson was so upset by the recent German blockade not because it violated any principles, but because it effectively put a halt to Entente orders without replacing them with their equivalent from Berlin. America was now deprived of all war trade and its profits. This left her in a position of real neutrality which, Trotsky argued, she could not sustain because since August 1914 her industry had been increasingly and then finally restructured to serve military demands. It had, in other words, become a war economy. He then dismissed the possibility that American soldiers could change the military situation in Europe, pointing out that if the mightiest (British) fleet in the world could not guarantee a free passage for goods then nothing could. For him, it was the bosses of finance capital and their interests which dictated American foreign policy and, at the then current moment, this meant war: 'a colossal new market will immediately be opened for American ammunition factory bosses in America itself... they need a "national danger" so as to be able to place the tower of Babel of war industry on the shoulders of the American people'.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time as laying bare the profit motives which demanded war, in other articles in *Novyi Mir* Trotsky argued that the real winner from American intervention would not be the capitalist bosses, but revolution. When he summarized his New York experiences in his autobiography Trotsky mentioned the conveniences in his flat (including electric lights, a bath and telephone) that Europeans were unused to.<sup>36</sup> In one of his comments upon daily life in New York at that time, however, he wrote a moving description of the effects of the drudgery suffered by ordinary people, out of which American capital built its achievements. He noted, during a rush hour ride on the metro, a humble and depressed crowd whose only solace lay in chewing gum.<sup>37</sup> The war, he predicted in other writings, would show the proletariat that only they, through social revolution, could resolve the problems that beset capitalism and which had led to America's entry into World War I.<sup>38</sup> He advised all socialists to 'prepare the soldiers for revolution!'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Whiteclay Chambers, p. 221. In 'Through the Window' Trotsky described the scene, witnessed while staring out of *Novyi Mir*'s office window, of an old man picking his way through a litter bin and selecting some mouldy bread, and wondered how President Wilson would explain how the old man's rights and dignity were being defended by the war (see Al'fa, 'U okna', *Novyi Mir*, No. 926, 3 March 1917, p. 3).

<sup>35</sup> Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Dlya chego Amerike voina?', *Novyi Mir*, No. 931, 9 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Trotskii, *Moya zhizn'*, p. 263.

<sup>37</sup> Al'fa, 'Zhivachka', *Novyi Mir*, No. 932, 10 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> 'Voina i revolyutsii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 943, 22 March 1917, p. 4. In 'Sober Thoughts' Trotsky noted the mayor's inadequate response to the problem of rising prices brought about by the war crisis. He warned the mayor that when hungry mothers protest it is not only mayors who lose their jobs (see Al'fa, 'Trezvyia mysli', *Novyi Mir*, No. 928, 6 March 1917, p. 4).

<sup>39</sup> 'Gotov'te soldat' revolyutsii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 930, 8 March 1917, p. 4.

After Nicholas II's abdication of the Russian throne in March 1917 anyone seeking confirmation of the link Trotsky constructed between war and revolution had a ready and current example to hand. Events in Russia continued to occupy Trotsky while he was in New York both before, but especially after, the collapse of the monarchy. He submitted two articles to *Novyi Mir* on Russia prior to Nicholas's fall from power. The first was to commemorate the twelfth anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Calling revolutionary anniversaries days for 'great study' as well as for remembrance, Trotsky enumerated the lessons to be learnt from the events of 1905: the proletariat was the only revolutionary class in Russia and all calls for it to co-operate with the bourgeoisie were hopelessly utopian.<sup>40</sup> In his second pre-revolution piece on Russia he highlighted the tsar's cynical view of the Duma, and the latter's willingness to fulfil its master's needs. He achieved this primarily through an imaginary conversation between a Russian and foreign diplomat, in which the former stated that the tsar would recall the Duma so as to receive another foreign loan, upon the receipt of which the Russian parliament would once again be closed. 'Thus,' Trotsky remarked without further comment, 'Russian politics marches along the path of progress.'<sup>41</sup>

Three points had for long been part of Trotsky's analysis of the course a revolutionary upheaval in Russia would take: first, it would be led by the proletariat; second, its policies would be socialist in content; and, third, it would evoke, either by inspiration or by force of arms, a spate of revolutions across the whole of Europe. During World War I Trotsky modified this analysis somewhat, adding that the United States of Europe would be the state form through which the European revolution would realize itself, and that revolution would occur first of all in Germany.<sup>42</sup> News of the fall of tsarism obviously confounded Trotsky's last prediction, but for the most part he was able to retain his prognoses for interpreting the events taking place in his homeland.

According to Trotsky, it was street demonstrations by the workers, eventually backed by the army, that had brought about the tsar's abdication. The bourgeoisie, led by his old antagonist Professor Milyukov, had not wanted the monarchy to fall. On the contrary, he claimed, the liberals looked to the tsar as the most trustworthy defender of property against the proletariat, and to the institution of monarchy as the form of government best suited to conduct an imperialist foreign policy. For Trotsky, the liberals had been *forced* to form a provisional government by two pressures, one external and the other internal. From outside the country the British, French and American money markets had told the Russian bourgeoisie to assume power because they did not want Nicholas II to conclude a separate peace with Germany, and the bourgeoisie was the only group that would continue the war. Then, the bourgeoisie itself was afraid that its responsibility for the war would be revealed if a workers' government called a halt to the hostilities. However, Trotsky

<sup>40</sup> N. Trotskii, 'Uroki velikogo goda. 9 yanvarya 1905–9 yanvarya 1917g', *Novyi Mir*, No. 890, 20 Jan. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Al'fa, 'Opyat' otkryli dumu', *Novyi Mir*, No. 930, 8 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> For an exposition of Trotsky's views on these issues as they developed from 1905 onwards see I. D. Thatcher, 'Uneven and combined development', *Revolutionary Russia*, ii (1991), 235–58.

argued that the bourgeoisie could not retain power for long. The fall of the provisional government was guaranteed because it could not satisfy the people's demands for peace, bread and land. He noted that a workers' committee had already been formed to 'protest at the liberals' attempts to misappropriate the revolution and betray the people to the monarchy',<sup>43</sup> and he called upon it to wrest total control into its hands to take Russia out of the war and to resolve the agrarian question. For Trotsky any other outcome would mean that the revolution had failed, since only a 'revolutionary workers' government... will be able to secure the fate of the revolution and the working class'. In turn he looked to the establishment of a revolutionary workers' government in Russia as an example for the German proletariat to follow. Otherwise, he worried, Wilhelm II would use the Russian proletariat's backing of its bourgeoisie to rekindle the German workers' enthusiasm for war. He raised the possibility of revolution not spreading from one country to another only to dismiss it. Revolution would leap from Russia to Germany either by example or by triumphant Russian workers liberating their German comrades by force of arms; or it would jump from Germany to Russia by the same means. Trotsky was so convinced that the whole of Europe was simmering with discontent, that 'the war has turned the whole of Europe into a powder-keg of social revolution',<sup>44</sup> that he was prepared for all eventualities.

It was in this buoyant mood that Trotsky and his family set sail from New York for Russia on 27 March 1917.<sup>45</sup> He could look back upon his time in America with a certain amount of satisfaction. He had argued for a revolutionary socialist analysis of and response to current events in print and at a host of meetings.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand his campaign against social-patriotism had not stopped America entering the war, but Trotsky must have realized that his journalism could not have done this. Besides, he now welcomed war as a harbinger of revolution, without, of course, recommending defeatism!<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Lev' N. Trotskii, 'Dva litsa. (Vnutrenniya sily russkoi revoliutsii)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 938, 17 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Idem*, 'Ot' kogo i kak' zashchishchar' revoliutsiyu?', *Novyi Mir*, No. 942, 21 March 1917, p. 4. For Trotsky's analysis of Europe on the verge of revolution see also *idem*, 'Nespokoino v' Evrope', *Novyi Mir*, No. 936, 15 March 1917, p. 4 and 'Pod' znamenem' kommuny', *Novyi Mir*, No. 938, 17 March 1917, p. 4. For further articles by Trotsky on Russia after the March revolution which were summarized but not directly quoted from in the main text of this article see *idem*, 'U poroga revoliutsii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 934, 13 March 1917, p. 4; —, 'Revoliutsiya v' Rossii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 937, 16 March 1917, p. 4; *idem*, 'Narostayushchii konflikt'. (Vnutrenniya sily revoliutsii)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 940, 19 March 1917, p. 4; and 'Voina ili mir?' (Vnutrenniya sily revoliutsii)', *Novyi Mir*, No. 941, 20 March 1917, p. 4. For an account of how Trotsky attempted to use his 1917 articles in *Novyi Mir* to argue that only he and Lenin had shared the same analysis of the further development of the Russian revolution when he wrote his *Istoriya russkoi revoliutsii* (1931) see J. D. White, 'Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution', *Journal of Trotsky Studies*, i (1993), 1–18.

<sup>45</sup> *Novyi Mir* announced Trotsky's departure for Russia in 'Or'ezd tovarishchii', *Novyi Mir*, No. 949, 28 March 1917, p. 1. For Trotsky's account of the difficulties he encountered at the Russian embassy in New York in obtaining a passport see, Al'fa, 'V' Russkom' konsul'stve', *Novyi Mir*, No. 944, 23 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Giving lectures was also a convenient way of raising money. Draper says that while in New York Trotsky gave 'no fewer than thirty-five lectures... at ten dollars a lecture' (T. Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York, 1957), p. 77). Adverts for Trotsky's lectures can be found in the following numbers of *Novyi Mir*: 890, 892–4, 899–901, 904–6, 912, 916–20, 923–5, 927–8, 931–5, 938, 942–6.

<sup>47</sup> Trotsky opposed Lenin's insistence that socialists should call for the defeat of their own government

No, Trotsky's biggest disappointments lay in the future. We now know that his hopes for a pan-European revolutionary government in the form of a United States of Europe were not realized. The German workers did not manage to seize power, despite the fact that the Bolsheviks overturned the provisional government in November 1917, and despite Trotsky's efforts to reveal the imperialist nature of the war through his 'no peace, no war' strategy during the peace negotiations with the Kaiser's government. It was perhaps quite fitting that the man who had argued that the proletariat needed to halt the war before it could turn cannons against the class enemy should have negotiated Russia's exit from World War I. However, this article has focused upon Trotsky's thoughts and activities while he was a resident of New York, and the story of how, why and in what context his association with the 'war to end all wars' came to an end lies beyond the scope of this present study.

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in World War I. For an exposition of this dispute see I. D. Thatcher, 'Trotskii, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, August 1914–February 1917', *Slavonic and East European Rev.*, lxxii (1994), 72–114.